around." He turned to the silent boy. "But you'd better drop in tomorrow morning and let me check you out again."

"I'll be all right."

McCoy cocked his head. "That wasn't a request, T'serek. I want to see those ribs before you go back to work and I'm taking you off the duty roster until I do."

"Yes, sir. May I go now?"

McCoy nodded and watched the self-possessed boy as he turned and left the room.

"What was that all about? I didn't really hurt him did I?"

McCoy shook his head. "Not you, Jim. You didn't do anything but aggravate it. Those ribs have been cracked for a week."

"He hadn't reported it?"

"Mmmm"

"Why not?"

McCoy didn't answer directly. "I've been working while you played games in the gym, and I think I came up with something. You remember we were there when Uhura had her accident?"

"Yes."

"Unless I'm mistaken, T'serek has been the proximate cause of most of our bruises and contusions Uhura's about as normal as human beings come. Her perfectly normal reaction to Dray T'serek caused her to trip over her own feet. When Carolyn Palmer signed on every male on board went around dragging one wing and running in circles. This is the opposite effect. It wasn't Carolyn's fault--she wasn't even particularly highly sexed. She just looked like a love goddess. And there's a little more to it with T'serek. Haven't you noticed anything unusual about him?"

"He's a heavyworlder, quick, strong--" Comprehension was dawning. "And beautiful. I noticed it."

"He's a Guthrie, Jim. I'd be surprised if you didn't notice it."

Kirk looked to Spock for enlightenment.

"Guthries, Captain, have a society founded on a warrior elite. Male bonding is their norm. I surmise T'serek springs from the ruling class--perhaps a younger son of the hereditary aristocracy. He is quite young. He would bring his values with him."

"Well, he wouldn't find any lack of willing partners here."

"I don't think he's willing, Jim," said McCoy. "If Spock's been reading the same stuff I have, Guthries aren't into casual sex at all. He's the age to form his bond, and he's giving out all the signals--in a mixed society. So we've got women on tranquilizers and men 'walking into doors' all over the ship. But he doesn't know he's responsible. If someone makes a pass at him, he's as insulted as--as Spock would be."

"Great. Well, it's not his fault he has sex appeal. He'll have to cope with it. But to go on working out with cracked ribs is nonsense. I thought there was something funny about that first bout. We'll have to keep an eye on him."

But there were, as always, things to distract attention from problems that didn't show up on telltales or printouts. Kirk rarely found T'serek in the gym after that, and he dropped the idea of seeking him out for the prospective match against Spock. Not that he held his new insight against the boy. Some of his crew had much stranger notions and compulsions--look at Spock--but unless and until it interfered with their duty hours, sex remained a personal problem. If T'serek wanted to defend his virtue, he could take his lumps. Kirk had had his own share of pressing offers before rank put up its barriers. Sexual opportunists were everywhere. Eventually T'serek would learn to turn them down with more tact.

Or perhaps not.

Two weeks after the incident in the gym, Kirk followed up a security report and found T'serek in his quarters, which had been reduced to a shambles, bleeding copiously from a cut on his head while two limp bodies were being removed in an awkward silence.

Kirk cursed mentally. You couldn't fault the boy, but if he'd damaged either of them seriously, it would have to go on his record, and then the Enterprise would have a scandal on her hands. He was beginning to have more sympathy with those promotional transfers.

"Take them to sickbay," Kirk ordered the security team. "I'll handle this."

T'serek had come to attention in the middle of the room, but his normally fair skin now had a greenish cast, and his uniform blouse was sodden with blood. Blood was beginning to drip from the fingers of his left hand.

"Sit down before you fall down," Kirk said abruptly. "Take that shirt off."

The boy hesitated, then skinned out of the ruined shirt and sat down. Kirk took it out of his hand and ripped the clean sleeve off, then turned T'serek's head to mop ungently at the flood until he could see the ugly gash that caused it. It had been a blow from behind, probably painful, but not dangerous. Headwounds always bled a lot. He padded the wound with the cloth, took the boy's head between his hands and pushed hard. T'serek blinked twice but didn't complain. Kirk maintained the pressure.

Neither of them spoke, and the room was quiet except for T'serek's ragged breathing, now coming under control. The room's thermostat was set lower than the ship's norm. In the cool air, standing so close, Kirk could feel the vital warmth of the boy's body. T'serek sat straight in the chair, trusting himself to Kirk's hands.

Roughed up, compromised, still he retained his reserve, a dignity that touched Kirk, even as it amused him. When the bleeding stopped, he stepped back.

"Now what happened."

T'serek's gray eyes were stormy, his jaw stubborn. His nostril took on an aristocratic flare as he said, "I decline to answer, sir."

"Not on my ship you don't. I want to know why you're always ass deep in trouble, and if you